

The art of the understatement

"I am just going outside and may be some time" - that's a quote attributed to the Antarctic explorer Captain Lawrence Oates before he emerged into a blizzard to face certain death.

It's a good example of the near perfect use of the understatement, a mechanism of language often employed by writers and satirists to great effect but sometimes even funnier when delivered off the cuff.

Employees with such a gift for understatement can be very useful to a business. They seem to have nerves of steel as they calmly say: "There's been a little glitch with the dry cleaning of your skirt Madam, and we hope you won't be too upset." With that they produce a garment for a small fairy that once fitted a full size adult human.

They are people who often use phrases like 'tiny problem', 'minor inconvenience' or 'small hiatus' when the event actually sits at the catastrophic end of the scale.

You have to love women who say, "Well he was a tad cross," referring to their husband's heart damaging rage in reaction to something.

Others are very good at understating their illnesses - near loss of a limb becomes, "a bit of a scrape" or a fatal tumour, "a small bump on the brain that needs to be taken care of."

While the overly dramatic can be energising, often producing a fun adrenalin rush, I have always had a greater pull towards the understated.

I was reminded of the understatement as used in comedy the other day when I caught a repeat of the still amusing 'Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em' on TV.

Michael Crawford's character Frank Spencer was always having "minor troubles" or a "spot of bother" when in reality he had left an irreversible trail of destruction in his wake.

The English are particularly good at it in both comedy and real life. A good friend lives on a river bank in the west of the county and has a great story about his very nice English neighbour getting into difficulty on the river quite late one night.